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The classroom setting is a source for daily and creative writing material for teachers as well as students. Teacher and student writing samples help to illustrate classrooms as cultures-in-the-making in which new rules are invented every day and suggest that stories of classroom life must of necessity end in question marks and untied threads. Several 5-year-old students demonstrate the way they think as they continue to develop new roles and rationales. The teachers' own thinking and studying take place as they observe themselves and the children moving in and out of untenable positions. This forms the bulk of the daily writing. (KEH)

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# Center for the Study of Writing

Occasional Paper No. 13

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Vivian Gussin Paley

September, 1989

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# MUST TEACHERS ALSO BE WRITERS?

by

Vivian Gussin Paley
University of Chicago Laboratory Schools[1]

> Were someone to ask for a single example of my best teaching moment, I might give them Jason and the mother pig. The pig is in a story of Katie's, and Jason is the boy who tells us every day that his helicopter is broken.
>
> "Come listen to Katie's story," I call to Jason. "This mother pig does something that reminds me of you."
>
> He approaches the story table blowing on his blades, one of the many ways to fix a broken helicopter, and I read what Katie has just dictated to me.
>
> > There is the three pigs. And the mother pig is there. The wolf huffs down the brick house. And the mother puts it back together.
>
> "That makes me think of the way you fix your helicopter," I say.
>
> Jason and Katie smile at each other, and I am a step closer to my vision of connecting everything that happens in this nursery school classroom. My habit of drawing invisible lines between the children's images is, I think, the best thing I do as a teacher.
>
> —from Vivian Gussin Paley, *The Boy Who Would Be A Helicopter*

But the tangled web of interconnections would quickly fade were I not also in the habit of writing down what Jason says and Katie says and I say before the dialogues are forgotten and their meaning obscured.

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[1]Vivian Gussin Paley is the author of six autobiographical books about classroom life. In this paper—which was presented as part of the Center for the Study of Writing Seminar Series at Berkeley, California in April, 1989—she has used excerpts from her daily journals and from her most recent book, *The Boy Who Would Be A Helicopter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), to provide examples of the classroom teacher as writer.

To nourish this ongoing documentary, I have put away the scorecards and relearned what I once, as a child, could do quite well: make sense of the classroom by watching the children and listening to what they say. We are not, any of us, to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we cannot be defined or classified. We can be known only in the singular unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events.

The belief that we and the children are part of a larger story-in-progress about the miracle of human differences has opened my mind and sent out lines of inquiry that go beyond labels and categories. We may allow science to intimidate us, but we will push stories to the furthest edge of recognizable reality and not worry over unexpected outcomes.

Story listeners and storytellers like suspense. The *not*-knowing about characters makes them more interesting. In a good story, we watch for the unanticipated turn in the plot and we presuppose that we are not seeing the entire picture. The good storyteller dismantles conventional responses and makes us eager to know what happens next. We are disappointed if it turns out to be the same old story. We want sharp differences to appear on every page.

This is what I want from my classroom. It has become for me a developing narrative that offers the same intense preoccupation with tiny details found in a good novel, but without the manipulated certainties of fiction. Yet, how do we lay hands on all this storytelling?

I have been rereading Jane Austen lately and she may, it seems to me, help us find our way. These country gentry families of hers, in their carefully constructed societies, pull me into their lives when my own seems too fragmented. Austen knew so well how to fit the pieces together; the reader need not wait long to see the effect of one event or behavior on all the others.

Our classrooms, alas, cannot be described so neatly. They are *not* carefully constructed societies. They are cultures-in-the-making, we and the children inventing new rules for ourselves every day. We never discover how all the pieces fit or what every behavior means, and the stories we tell of classroom life must of necessity end in question marks and untied threads.

Still, though Austen knew the directions all paths would take, her characters do not. They are in the position we find ourselves, where every new event seems to come as a surprise. How these Austen characters attempt to uncover their truths and harmonies gives us much to think about as we go about our special task of discovering individual motivation and societal forces in the classroom.

For one thing, they write letters. Most folks in an Austen novel write letters nearly every day to help them explain what happened the previous day and to anticipate the events of the next. In fact, those who don't write or who write

poor letters are often seen as lacking in character. People were known as much by their letters as by their conversation at tea. Friends might correspond several times a day.

Such was the case in Austen's real life as well. She and her sisters, nieces, cousins, and friends transmitted their expectations and disappointments to one another by daily post. Many were not school-educated women—their brothers were privileged to attend school, not they—but they became articulate language users as they carried on extended conversations during afternoon tea and long country walks, as they read novels aloud after dinner and conscientiously recorded their thoughts in letters and diaries.

What would they make of our on-hold, call-waiting phone conversations and our disengaged commentary as we collect messages about more phone calls? What might *we* be like if suddenly we were transported into a world of uninterrupted dialogue and leisurely contemplation?

In those days, the manner in which one expressed oneself was important. Quite ordinary people scheduled letter and diary writing alongside piano and singing practice. The writing table was a laboratory where the minutiae and mores of life and society were dissected after reviewing them at tea. Each day brought new reflections and fresh misgivings upon which to expand and rhapsodize.

A single comment by a visitor could provoke a flurry of written interpretations, each telling a tale of pride and prejudice, sense and sensibility, of good and evil seen through the prism of fantasy and expectation.

* * * * *

These are the same issues that concern Joseph and Alex, two five-year-olds in my class, though they have not yet learned to write. But they do dictate stories every day that have the sound of morality tales, and the continuity of their written communication grows rapidly throughout the year. They are, in a sense, writing letters to each other, offering ideas to ponder by way of roles to play, while I attempt to read between their lines and fill journals with my own brand of storytelling. It is less spontaneous but, for me, equally useful in figuring out the human dimensions of the classroom.

Joseph dictates:

> Once there was a man who lived in a little wooden house.
> And he loved to go out and play in the grass. And one day
> he saw a wolf who is Alex and the wolf growled at him.
> And he shot the wolf and ate him. The end.

When we act out Joseph's story, Alex agrees, hesitantly, to be the wolf. Why does his friend want to devour him? The next day Alex responds with a different scenario. He has learned something about the power of the pen.

> Once upon a time a hunter came. And then he saw a wolf. I'm the wolf and Joseph is the hunter. He tried to shoot the wolf but I'm too big and strong and fierce. So the wolf ate the man for dinner. Happily ever after.

These two friends, continually testing power and position in play and conversation, have found the literary means to explore and express life's more puzzling aspects. I record their stories and their talk because I too have found a literary process by which to follow relationships and realities in a classroom. I am as concerned and curious about good and bad as the children are; I want to know how these perceptions affect learning and teaching.

"On guard!" says Alex, pointing a small paper sword at Joseph.

"You don't even know what on guard means," Joseph replies.

"I do."

"What does it mean?"

"I'm not telling you. I'm just saying it."

"See? You don't know what it means. I *do* know what it means."

"Then why do you want me to tell you?"

"I want to know if you know what it means."

"I do know but I'm not telling you because I'm too busy doing my story."

And he begins:

> Once there was some pirates and one was good and one was bad but sometimes both of them was good and . . .

He halts in mid-sentence. "Teacher, you know what, teacher? Sometimes me and Joseph are like enemies."

"You mean sometimes you really feel angry at each other?"

"I don't know." He pauses to examine his sword, then resumes the interrupted story.

> And the good pirate said to the bad pirate, "Are you bad or good? If you're good you can have the gold and the eye patch."

Alex stays seated, cutting black paper shapes and waiting for one that resembles an eye patch. Suddenly he asks, "Remember that other day I told about a hunter? And the mother that was a wife?"

"The baby with a gun?" I reply.

"Did you like that story?" he asks gravely.

"Very much. The baby becomes a hunter. I do remember."

Later, I write in my journal: Why does Alex recall this strange plot he imagined the day after his baby sister was born? Why does he think of it right now as he tells the pirate story? Joseph's friendship must give Alex some of the same feelings of vulnerability as did the arrival of a new sibling.

Alex and Joseph search for symbols that may, for the moment, explain and control the daily gains and losses. And I, through the use of their imagery, am enabled to find some of the words I need to account for the unexpected in this school culture we share.

I have lived in classrooms most of my life, yet I am often as surprised as the children by the events around us. But the more I listen to and record the children's fantasies and explanations, the easier it becomes to bring out my own. And if I do not begin with "Once upon a time" or "Let's pretend" as often as they do, there is nonetheless some semblance of a plot within which to imagine meaning and motive.

Clara's sadness is one such plot. She is too sad to play, she tells us, but cannot remember why she is so sad.

"Clara is too sad to play," I say to the children at snack, turning on my tape recorder. "If we tell her what makes us sad maybe she'll think of what is making her sad."

"When my mom leaves I'm sad," Nell says. "Because I want her to stay." We know this is so; nearly all of Nell's stories end with "And the mom didn't go to work and stayed home all day to play with the little girl."

"I'm sad if someone pushes me," Carl tells us.

Joseph remembers that dead people make him sad. "Certain dead people?" I ask.

"Everybody that's dead."

"Me too," Alex echoes. "Everyone dead makes me sad."

The next day, Joseph is thrown off a bull in a rodeo and dies. "This is the first time you have yourself die in a story, Joseph," I comment.

"Let me be the one who dies," Alex pleads.

"No, me. It's my story."

"This is interesting, boys. You said yesterday that it makes you sad to think about dead people. But you both want to die in the rodeo."

"In real life dead," Joseph explains.

"I know, but maybe when you tell stories about being dead you don't feel so sad about real life dead. Because the stories are pretend."

"Pretend real," Nell corrects me. "But I don't put anyone dead in my stories only people that come alive quickly."

I could not follow this hilly landscape without securing it to a written road map. Clara's sadness bids us to recall our own, which in turn leads to thoughts of death and resurrection, and these ideas will criss-cross many others before they appear on the pages of my journal. It is here I will try to single out the separate themes.

Clara's sadness is part of the classroom story and so is Jason's preoccupation with his helicopter. The history of our successes and failures in bringing Clara and Jason closer to us must be documented, but, as a storyteller, I'll avoid labels and theories that offer answers before the questions have been imagined.

* * * * *

Whenever I think about the children's differences, my sense of the excitement of teaching mounts. Without the uniqueness of each child, teaching would be a dull, repetitive exercise for me. Every day, after the children leave, my assistants and I clean up quickly so we can have time to compare revelations.

We speak of surprises, seldom of certainties. We want to talk about what we don't understand and what has not worked out according to expectations. Gail and Trish are relative

newcomers to teaching and they tell me this is a useful approach to the subject: What did we find out today that we didn't know yesterday and for which we have no answer? They fill their pockets with scraps of paper on which they note the "good" incidents, the kind that point to misunderstandings and how these come about.

"Remember Edward's story where a tall person rocked and rocked and you thought he meant in a rocking chair?" Gail asks me.

"Didn't he?"

"No, he meant getting under rocks and breaking out of a trap."

"How did you find out?"

"I heard him in the blocks. He told Eli—wait, let me find it—here, he said, 'Pretend you're rocking then you rock under the rocks. Then you rock and rock the rocks to pieces and you break out of the trap.' "

Trish nods. "Gail's right. See, Vivian, your comment threw him off the track. It made him doubt his own common sense. He knew he didn't mean rocking chair but you were so certain rocking had to do with a chair that he forgot why he was hammering when he acted out these words."

"What exactly did I say?"

"Something like, 'Is that a different kind of rocking chair?' "

At home I replay the tape and transcribe my exact question. "Is there a rocking chair on the mountain?" I asked Edward. This was when he stopped hammering and looked confused. Then he covered up his confusion by falling down.

The next day I tell Edward, "Mrs. Taylor told me I made a mistake in your story and when I listened to my tape, I saw that she was right. I made a big mistake."

"What was it?"

"Well, you said rocked and rocked and I thought you meant a rocking chair."

He smiles. "Why did you?"

"Probably I didn't listen and watch carefully enough. Because you *were* hammering."

"I was breaking rocks. We was in a trap."

"Now I do understand, Edward. 'Rocking' comes from rocks. Breaking rocks."

This is not too much time to give to words and their meanings. The children learn that figuring out what we do and say and read and play are equally important. Everything is supposed to make sense; if it doesn't, ask questions, go over it again, find out why the picture is blurred. The range of possibilities for misunderstandings is quite astonishing. And is this not a lucky circumstance? It means we ought never to run out of great curriculum materials, free for the asking. We only need to listen for our own errors and there is enough text to fill the school year.

—from *Vivian Gussin Paley, The Boy Who Would Be A Helicopter*

And there is enough good copy to fill any number of journals. It is useful to discuss such matters with colleagues, especially those who work in the same classroom, but *talk is not enough*. Only as we write down our thoughts and observations may we question and argue with ourselves about the things we do and say. Note: question and argue with ourselves.

If I were principal of your school or mine, this is what I would announce next September: "Hear ye, hear ye! There will be no faculty meetings this year. And no committees or in-service programs. I am calling a halt to official group-think for a whole year."

Those who had not already dozed off would clap and cheer, until they heard the rest of my message. "Using the time thus made free, you are to keep a daily journal or write letters to a close friend. You are to write about the things that you do not understand, that didn't work, and try to imagine why. It is only with yourself or perhaps with a good friend that you can learn to be completely honest. Once you begin to bring out the first errors and misjudgments the dam will burst with revelations. One idea will flow into another, reaching deeper into that reservoir of impressions, anxieties, and fragile connections we all keep bottled up beneath the surface."

"But," you will argue, "this can happen when I talk."

"Seldom. You are interrupted and distracted before you can carry any thought very far. Furthermore, when you become too self-revealing or too critical of accepted notions and practices—even of your own—your audience is likely to turn away."

"Wait, not so fast," you urge. "I need my colleagues, their ideas and support."

"True. But you also need to know your own ideas more intimately; you need to know what makes you different from your colleagues. You have your own *inner* support of memories, feelings, and instincts. Through these you will find your own questions and follow through in your own ways. It is quite euphoric, really, to see yourself revealed on paper."

Your principal and mine will probably not agree to such a plan. The fact is, however, once we stop *playing* out our feelings and ideas, as the children do, writing—personal, private writing—becomes the tool with which we can best tap the vital store of earlier learnings and instincts that enable us to make real connections in the classroom and in our outside lives as well.

Those signs we see on trucks and taxis, *How am I doing?*, can be answered by ourselves alone as we listen, watch, and then record the events of the day, those that make sense and those that don't.

We can write about the problem of the moment or the problems of a lifetime. What do we think, what do the children think, and what do we think about what they think? Never will we fully discover the essential issues for each child or for ourselves, but what we do, as we write, is continually demonstrate the process of searching for solutions as we ask ourselves the questions no one else will ask.

Last week, I wrote in the margin of my journal: Why do you avoid Robert's negative feelings? My tape recorder had picked up two rather anxious comments plus the fact that I intended to ignore them. This is the sort of omission I look for. What we don't say often tells more of our story than the spoken word.

Robert was about to dictate a Peter Pan story when he confided, "I hope somebody won't be here. I hope Julia can't come today."

I didn't ask why but let him begin his story. "Once a boy named Peter drownded Captain Hook and . . . by the way, is Wayne coming today?"

"He's still on a trip."

"Good. I hope he never comes. Then Captain Hook can't swim and Wendy beez nice to the lost boys. The end."

Having written all this down, I could no longer pretend I didn't hear Robert's between-the-lines admissions. The next day I ask, "You said something yesterday about Julia and Wayne not coming, do you remember?"

"Because Wayne's not my friend. He tells Brucie not to play with me."

"And Julia? You also didn't want her to come."

"Because I *do* want her to come. I can't wait so long. We're going to play doggies. Just us. Not Wayne and not Brucie."

What a piece of information to have: Two similar responses represent opposite emotions; pleasure and pain are mixed up together for Robert.

"So when you hoped Julia wouldn't come you really wanted her to come but you were afraid she might not come?"

"Yes."

"But you hoped Wayne really wouldn't come because he tells Bruce not to play with you. This is something we should talk about when Wayne comes back."

I am translating my research into a cause-and-effect curriculum with my colleague Robert, and soon we'll continue the dialogue with our colleagues Wayne, Julia, and Brucie. My study and writing have now become teaching.

This process of examining complaints and imagining solutions gives a great surge of power and communal purpose. And much to write about. There is always a new scenario out there if we care enough to find it. We try in the classroom, we try in our journal, and the next day we test our reality alongside the children's.

*They* are our colleagues in this endeavor. They are the ones who will first show us what makes them different and how they connect to everyone else. They will demonstrate the way they think as they continue to develop new roles and rationales. Our own thinking and studying takes place as we observe ourselves and the children moving in and out of untenable positions. This will form the bulk of our daily writing.

Here is a sample of a teacher and child in an untenable position. How much time would you spend on the following encounter? If you are keeping a journal it is the kind of puzzle you welcome. Jason has begun something I

describe later to Gail and Trish as "determined ambivalence." I turn on my tape recorder and enter into his yes/no predicament.

"My story is in my house," he says. "No, it's not in my house." He sits in his helicopter house and purposely initiates a dilemma.

"Do you mean you want to tell a story about your helicopter house?" I ask.

"No. Yes. No, I want to."

"Should I put you on the story list?"

"No. My story is in my house."

Samantha intercedes. "He means he wants to stay in his house and tell his story."

"No. Yes."

"You're having a hard time deciding, Jason. I'll ask you again later."

The incident attracts Simon's curiosity. He decides to test Jason's strategy. "Can I come in, Jason?"

"Yes. No, I want to play alone."

"You said yes?" Simon asks.

"Yes, no, I want to play alone."

"Do you want me to play with you?"

"Yes . . . no."

"Anyway," Simon says slowly, "I'm playing with Joseph so I can't come in."

To be or not to be, to give or not to give. This seems to be on Jason's mind at snack as well. "I do want raisins," he says, taking a handful, "but I don't want them," giving them back.

"Jason, do you want the raisins or not?"

He grabs another handful and then quickly empties the raisins in my hand. "Yes no." He is not smiling.

What is this all about, I wonder. Is he acting out his uncertainty about school—or simply teasing us? In either case, of course, he finds himself with no friend in his house or raisins in his hand.

"He's acting out that good ol' cliche: mixed messages," Gail laughs.

"Maybe he *is* acting out the idea of mixed messages—and *I'm* the one who plays that game he's curious about."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it seems to me I do more of that where Jason is concerned than with anyone else. Here's a good example: Yesterday, Jason momentarily rested his helicopter on Simon's squirrel house. Now I know how eager Simon has been to include the helicopter in his squirrel play, so I said something like, 'I see your helicopter is playing in the squirrely hole.' Both boys were surprised because it obviously wasn't so. Then I tried to get out of *my* hole by saying, 'I mean, it *looks* as if it is.' "

Gail smiles at me. "So Jason is wondering what *your* game is?"

"Well, why would I pretend he's playing with Simon when he isn't? Can you trifle with people in such ways or can't you?"

I struggle with these paradoxes, and so does Jason. He continues to act out his inquiries until he feels satisfied. "My story is in my house," he tells me again, a day later.

"You're playing in your house?" I ask.

"My *story* is playing in my house."

"Not on paper?" I suggest.

"Without words," he replies.

"Oh, with*out* words. You want to tell me the story but you don't want me to write it down."

"He means the kind I did that time, remember?" Simon explains.

"Jason, are you thinking about a story while you're playing in your house and you want to act it out at story time without first putting it down on paper? The way Simon did a few days ago?"

"Yes. No."

"But maybe?"

"Yes. That's what he means," Simon assures me.

It doesn't matter if we have figured out Jason's meaning. Simon and I have treated the subject with the seriousness it deserves. We are using Jason's behavior as an exercise in logic and Jason follows along. Multiply the effect by 24 children, 180 school days a year, and you have an intensive continuous curriculum in language and thought.

Now, see how far I can take this yes/no investigation as I collect more data in my journal. Having focused my attention on this "plot," each day brings out incidents that seem relevant.

"I want to sit *here*," Jason says as we settle down in the story room.

"No, don't sit by me!" Alex insists, moving alongside Samantha who quickly occupies the seat he has just left.

"I don't want you, Samantha," Jason says, capturing the empty seat next to Alex, and this time Alex doesn't object. All these yeses and noes happen so fast I have no time to respond, but it is clear that the children consider these behaviors logical and socially correct.

Alex's story of the day treats the yes/no issue in dramatic form. Having listened to an irreverent three pigs story told by Samantha, he immediately creates a literary yes to her no. Here is Samantha's version:

> Once upon a time there lived three little pigs. And then came a big bad wolf. And the little pigs got ate up by the big bad wolf. And then they got ate up by all the big bad wolfs. Happily ever after.

Alex responds sharply:

> Those pigs. The big bad wolf eated them but he had a gun inside his stomach and the pigs shooted him apart. Then they boiled him for supper. Happily ever after.

I watch Samantha's three pigs being "ate up" by the wolves and wonder how this fits in with her need to mother Jason. And where, for that matter, in Alex's confident response is the child who cries because he can't sit next to Joseph?

> —from Vivian Gussin Paley, *The Boy Who Would Be A Helicopter*

These are some of the questions I will write about after school. To me, and to the children, the most interesting aspects of the classroom are the vastly different ways people find to behave, even ways that are sometimes disruptive or confusing. These were the most compelling events in society for Jane Austen as well.

How do we begin to write about the classroom? The empty journal page glares accusingly, but we do not feel a bit as if we are Jane Austen or even her sister Cassandra who wrote such sensitive letters.

When I was new at this, I needed preplanned safe structures. Those formal discussions that are part of most school days provided me with a relatively controlled arena for practicing the art of classroom reportage. Such discourse is easily accessible, easy to tape, easy to transcribe, and often can be recalled without a tape recorder if not too much time elapses.

Our best discussions, then and now, seem to focus on fairy tales. They are treasure chests for open-ended inquiries into the collective imaginations of children and teachers. Indeed, I continually must reassess my position even as I attempt to uncover the children's.

> These days I'm feeling ambivalent about fairy tales for young children. Even when I use my own words and modify the danger potential, the children seem worried. Samantha and Lilly take turns asking if someone is about to be eaten or

lost, and Arlene wants to know if I'm telling it "the real way." Real means scary.

"I wonder if the mother pig missed her children," I ask, thinking immediately that this is too manipulative a question.

"She's not nice," Lilly responds. "She made them go away from her."

"Because she couldn't handle them, Lilly," Samantha says.

"Yeah, she lost all her money," Joseph adds.

"Maybe a thief came and took it," Alex says.

"But Lilly is sorry she made her children leave." And I'm sorry I asked a question that makes Lilly feel sad.
"Probably she didn't know there was a wolf," I say.

"She did know!" Joseph argues. "See, she wanted the boys to get away before the wolf came so she could trick him and she could stick him with a stick."

"Your idea is interesting, Joseph. You think she had a feeling there might be a wolf coming so she thought of this idea to save her boys. She sent them away."

"And the children wouldn't be home," he says. "And she was stronger."

"Stronger than the wolf?" I ask.

Everyone nods in agreement. "Much stronger. The mother is much stronger," they tell one another.

I have another question up my sleeve. "I wonder if the pigs ever go back to live with their mother." There is an immediate chorus of yeses.

"She misses her children," Edward says.

"Because she doesn't like it to be alone with the baby," Jason decides.

"Oh, do you think she had a baby at home?"

> The children ponder the notion in silence. It is an awesome moment. "Naw, she didn't, Jason," Joseph responds. "She was too poor."
>
> "And she was too busy," Alex adds. The children don't want to think of a baby at home while the little pigs are out in the forest with the wolf.
>
> "But Jason thinks there might be a baby," I remind them.
>
> "Jason, see, that baby is the littlest pig," Katie explains. "That pig went away too."
>
> "I think maybe they could go back to live in their old house and they would see the wolf hanged up on the wall," Joseph states with finality, as if he can envision the entire inside of the mother's house.
>
> —from Vivian Gussin Paley, *The Boy Who Would Be A Helicopter*

My qualms about fairy tales are momentarily settled: How can an activity that brings forth so many good ideas be wrong?

Then, a week later, Joseph says something that puts me right back up on the fence, giving me just what I need for my teaching and writing incentives: a legitimate yes/no dilemma. Now I am in the same place as Jason with his yeses and noes, examining the turf on both sides before jumping.

I have just retold "The Three Pigs" at Joseph's request when he calls out, "Are you going to ask good questions or bad questions?"

"Which are the bad ones?"

"Like if someone took something or if they did a bad thing."

"Which kind do you like?"

"The good kind."

"The pretty kind," Samantha adds.

Joseph's strong feelings surprise me. He is seldom loathe to demolish a happy ending, and his own play and stories are riddled with "bad things." Yet he worries about my questions. Has he picked up my uncertainties?

How odd it seems: Joseph decides there are good and bad questions and, suddenly, the whole fairy tale issue comes alive again. But, in my journal, I take the matter further. The next entry reads: Good and bad questions? These are moral issues. How can one discover what good and bad mean in a classroom?

For me, the road to discovery lies waiting to be mapped out in each day's journal pages. All these yeses and noes are pieces of a continuing mystery story about individuals and groups who are learning to live together in a school society that seems very different from a sensible home and family only when we arbitrarily make it that way.

Every encounter is full of questions; there is much that exists beneath the surface. Even Jane Austen—who, by the way, apparently wrote her novels at a living room table surrounded by a lively family—even Austen knew there were few answers, only temporary solutions to puzzling behaviors and events. If this were not so, how would there always be material for a new journal page, a new letter, and, in her case, another novel?

There are few novelists among us, and only a small number will have their works published in any form. But we all have the desire to learn more about ourselves and the children who call us Teacher. Let us resurrect the daily journal to help us study the most complex society ever assembled in a single place: the school classroom.

I end with a personal note, about my mother who is 89. Last year, I convinced her to begin writing me letters, even though we live in the same city. Not every day, because her fingers are quite arthritic, but every week or so.

Each letter now reveals something she never got the chance to tell me before. In a recent one she confided her dream of becoming a teacher. This immigrant girl who never heard the English language before the age of nine, and who left school after one year of high school to help support the family, had considered teaching an unattainable goal. As she reconstructs that period in her letters, she realizes she could have become anything she desired, had she but understood the choices.

It turns out that my mother is a natural writer. When I tell her this she says, "How can that be? Anyone can do what I do."

"You're right, Ma," I reply. "This is exactly what I want to tell every teacher I meet."

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